Best Practices for Councils and Planning

The following represent the “best practices” that were shared during the nine “Council Conversation” meetings in the deaneries between January and March of 2010.

Allow the time and attention necessary to form the Parish Pastoral Council well. Work through the Mission and Vision statement for the parish before jumping into planning.

Use the Revisioning the Parish Pastoral Council Workbook by Mary Anne Gubish and Susan Jenny, SC published by Paulist Press.

Consider a discernment model for selecting members to a Parish Pastoral Council rather than an appointment model. It completely changes the experience of how the council does its work going forward.

When it is time for a member of the Parish Pastoral Council to rotate off the Council, have that member recommend three parishioners who could potentially take their place.

Consult the community in appropriate ways

► Example: Holy Eucharist, Tabernacle focused on one of the 11 Elements of a Vibrant Parish each week. They asked parishioners to assess how the parish was doing in that area, how it could improve, and what parishioners were willing to do to improve it.

► Example: St. George, Titusville used a simple survey at masses to get some feedback from the parish last year. This year, they are holding listening/discussion meetings with parishioners in different age groups.

Don’t dwell on your lack or on the challenges. Focus energy on your opportunities.

It is necessary to understand and respect the unique role of each: Pastor, Parish Staff, Pastoral Council, Ministry Leaders, etc. All have appropriate engagement in planning process. Pastor and Pastoral Council develop the mission and vision statements with input from the community; and gets feedback on drafts. PPC focuses parish on certain goals based on listening and study. Since parish will rely on staff and ministries to carry out the action plans, the PPC works together with staff and ministry leaders to name objectives and strategies in pursuit of the goals.

It is necessary to transition from the parish council model (in which the group is involved in administrative decisions, problem-solving, projects, and short-term programmatic planning) to the pastoral council model (in which the group engages in visioning and planning in an ongoing way for the long term future of the parish).

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One of the techniques to move beyond the immediate concerns is to create a virtual “parking lot” or holding area into which you place issues that come up or are brought to the Council’s attention by parishioners. Every few months, the Council reviews what has been placed in the “parking lot,” groups together related items, and sends the issues or concerns to the appropriate ministry in the parish. If patterns begin to emerge, the Council will discuss the issue in terms of its implications for parish life and continuance of the mission.

Reach out to other parishes in your area to learn from and support one another. This does not have to be arranged by the diocese; it can arise from the local needs.

It is very useful to take a look at your parish and its practices through the eyes of a person who does not belong to the parish (newcomer, visitor, non-Catholic seeker, neighbor). This can give you a new perspective.

It is helpful if one of your parish pastoral council members serves as the parish delegate to the Diocesan Pastoral Council. That member serves in a liaison capacity and is able to relay information in both directions.

Involving more people in the life and mission of the parish requires personal invitation. The parish bulletin, oral announcements and the like help to inform the community about the need; but inviting persons individually is the most effective way to engage them.

Planning is ongoing. We cannot do it once and get it done.

Over time, it is helpful to plan for longer periods of time. A parish might have several objectives for a 3 – 5 year period for which they set action plans (strategies) and evaluate annually.